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# Liberal crisis machine: The Hewlett Foundation in the era of polycrisis philanthropy

Inderjeet Parmar 

## Abstract

This paper shows that the Hewlett Foundation, contra its legal status, its non-political self-concept and conventional scholarly claims to third-sector or technocratic neutrality, acts as a *liberal* ‘crisis machine’ to manage and moderate radical change, and to strengthen existing power distributions. This occurs through programmes that protect the US elite constitutional processes, promote post-neoliberalism, and address China’s geo-economic challenge. This provides a powerful example of how an under-researched liberal-progressive foundation’s power works and how technocratic-liberalism organizes ruling elites (including extreme and far-right Trumpists) who shape and perpetuate the terrain of political polarization, attacks on democracy and the structural inequities of neoliberalism. The Hewlett Foundation’s ‘performative radicalism’ in managing crises is rooted in its centrality within corporate elite networks and in the mindsets and imperatives of US global hegemony. Using Gramscian concepts of hegemony, organic crisis and passive revolution, the paper presents the Hewlett Foundation as an architect-funder of elite knowledge networks spanning foundations, think tanks, academia and the state. These networks consciously organize elite consensus and disorganize or downplay mass movements’ roles in driving radical change.

Keywords: crisis machine; post-neoliberalism; US hegemony; elite knowledge networks; polycrisis; organic crisis.

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The Hewlett Foundation (hereafter HF), which is neglected in studies of American philanthropy, especially in the current era of prolonged political crisis, is highly influential. As a leading American liberal-progressive philanthropic foundation, embedded in elite intellectual, corporate and US state networks, the HF identified early the mounting crisis of US constitutional norms, political polarization and the effects of digital ‘disinformation’. Historically overshadowed by the so-called Big Three foundations (Ford, Carnegie and Rockefeller), the HF is a key instrument of ‘soft’ and convening power – a smaller organization that builds coalitions and networks to leverage innovative strategies.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, the HF inspired several major foundations to formally invest hundreds of millions of dollars in programmes to mitigate democratic dysfunctions and crises of hegemonic authority. Using Gramsci-style terminology, HF calls for an intellectual paradigm shift to a new ‘common sense’ to replace neoliberal ‘market fundamentalism’ with a more ‘state-shaped’ market economy.<sup>2</sup> While its programmes aimed at correcting the failings of US democracy began under its then new president, Larry Kramer, their urgency intensified with Donald Trump’s election in 2016, further developed during the COVID-19 pandemic, the George Floyd protests (see Hewlett Foundation, 2020a; Parmar, 2020; Ward, 2022) and the Trump-led insurrection of 6 January 2021 (see Hewlett Foundation, 2020b; Parmar, 2021). These domestic crises were explicitly compounded by the consequences of the 2008 financial crash, the rise of multipolarity, especially China’s rise. In 2021, several HF staff members were appointed to the Biden administration where they helped legitimize and launch ‘Bidenomics’.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, the HF’s programmes offer insight into the ‘mind’ of the liberal establishment, its practical limitations and ideological approach to the crises of constitutional democracy and neoliberal political economy. For example, despite the focus on ‘saving’ US democracy, the HF funded pro-Trump individuals and organizations, including ‘election deniers’<sup>4</sup> (Hewlett Foundation, 2020e). This paper offers the first thorough, research-based description and analysis of the HF in the context of the current crisis of US hegemony.<sup>5</sup>

The HF’s programmes are immersed in the challenges of twenty-first-century US power – its political stability at home through post-neoliberal industrial policy (CHIPS [Creating Helpful Incentives to Produce Semiconductors]), the Inflation Reduction Act, among others; see White House, 2022), combined with efforts to outcompete China. It is a liberal-progressive foundation operating at the intersections of US domestic and foreign policy establishments at a time of domestic crises and more competitive geopolitics, which has mobilized a range of foundations (Open Society, Omidyar, Ford, Rockefeller and others), think tanks (the Council on Foreign Relations [CFR], the Brookings Institution, the Roosevelt Institute), elite universities, ideological networks ranging from the pro-Trump American Compass to the Progressive International, as well as student groups across more than 40 countries. Within the philanthropic community, the HF is regarded as an example of ‘polycrisis philanthropy’ (Ratcliffe, 2024).

In this paper, I first provide a brief introduction to the conventional approach to the role of US foundations, followed by a theoretical discussion focused on Gramscian concepts, such as ‘organic crisis’, hegemony, the role of organic intellectuals and passive revolution. This suggests that the HF should be understood as a liberal crisis machine: a form of networked elite power embedded in US hegemonic power structures. Indeed, this concept frames this special section and is here applied to the HF. A specifically Gramscian analysis of the HF is an original contribution, challenging Reich’s (2018) liberal perspective. Placed in the context of other key positions in discussions of the broader roles of American philanthropy, a Gramscian perspective thus radically challenges dominant narratives.

Secondly, to further demonstrate the Gramscian approach, I draw on original empirical evidence from a variety of reliable sources<sup>6</sup> to show how the HF’s leaders are rooted in elite networks and ideologically narrow and unrepresentative in practice, and that their programmes reflect their structural position in the American power elite. Hence, their concept of ‘American national interests’ is rooted in their political-intellectual networks and revenues from the globalized corporate economy, which is fundamental to understanding their strategies and programmes.

Thirdly, I provide further evidence from the HF’s extensive digital archives to show the thinking, operations and effects of their ‘polycrisis-oriented’ programmes. To show the efficacy of Gramscian theory, I look briefly at their Madison Initiative, their programme to counter digital disinformation and their overarching mission to shift the United States towards a new, bipartisan common sense grounded in ‘post-neoliberalism’. In practice, these initiatives, thus far neglected by scholars, are aspects of an overarching crisis-inspired strategy that renews corporate-dominated US power and prepares for intensified geopolitical competition (Gilens & Page, 2014; Giridharadas, 2018; Reich, 2018).

Finally, I turn to the conclusion to show that a Gramscian perspective provides a persuasive framework for understanding the character of the HF’s strategy and programmes, as well as its severe limits and, at least in part, its unintended, though foreseeable, authoritarian consequences.

### **US foundations: Dominant views and a Gramscian critique of liberal philanthropy**

Dominant, conventional approaches to American philanthropy tend to view its institutions as relatively benign, selfless, public service-oriented bodies, above and beyond politics and the interests of the state and big business (Anheier & Daly, 2005; Arnove, 1982; Bell, 1971). Foundations are frequently described as part of a ‘third sector’ that lies beyond the state and the market and is independent of both, aimed at building a robust independent civil society, promoting public understanding, and serving broad societal interests, if not the ‘national’

interest. It is also argued that the peculiarities of US political development meant that, unlike in Europe, where intellectuals were mobilized by political parties, American scholars and intellectuals shunned parties perceived as corrupt and formed their own autonomous professional associations, thereby reinforcing their political independence. Hence, philanthropic foundations find scholars independently minded and less amenable to intellectual influence through the offer or availability of research funding (Karl & Katz, 1987). Reich (2018) recognizes the ‘tensions’ between HF and other wealthy US foundations and democracy and suggests minor reforms with a view to making them more accountable. A Gramscian analysis, provided below, is critical and locates the HF within the hegemonic strategies of US elite power networks, built on structural inequalities and a corporate political economy, embedded in a dominant US historic bloc. Built to maintain the *status quo*, with reforms confined within strict bounds, the HF is adept at radical performativity and co-opting dissenting voices. This paper is the first thorough archive research-based description, analysis and critique of the HF in the Trump era of polycrisis.

The ‘polycrisis philanthropy’ perspective is effectively an updated version of the conventional, liberal-rooted angles outlined above (Beasley, 2024). Polycrisis is the current liberal-ideological buzzword referring to the effects of the commingling of a series of *separate, disparate and coincidental* crises, such as COVID-19, climate change, the Russia–Ukraine war and the attendant food and energy crises. But, fundamentally, polycrisis is also caused by the simultaneous decline of (US/Western) order alongside increasing global multipolarity, leading to a multitude of concurrent crises everywhere.<sup>7</sup> Hence, multiple *separate systems* representing world order, each with its own crises, have become causally interconnected, creating dangers greater than the sum of their parts (Tooze, 2022). Polycrisis represents a technocratic consensus approach in the Bretton Woods system, including overt recognition of the need to renegotiate and renew that order, and its reconstitution on slightly more diversified terms, rather than a thoroughgoing multipolar order (Sial, 2023).

The polycrisis concept, nevertheless, suggests that there will be domestic crises and polarizations, heightened international rivalries, processes of unravellings and reconstitutions, as well as selective global economic and other forms of interpenetration. That is, there are greater dangers at home of authoritarianism and xenophobia, spilling over into intensified geopolitical competition and conflict, but likely moderated by global interdependencies (Lawrence, 2023) and by domestic technocratic reform. Polycrisis, however, has limited systemic features and suggests that solutions lie in ‘new’ ideas emerging from elite networks within established institutions. This suggests relatively modest reforms and course corrections, as the problems of the ‘system’ are effectively seen as excesses rather than systemic.

The current analysis challenges the HF’s and conventional scholarly positions’ professed non-political, ideologically diverse character and its status as a 501(c)(3) body.<sup>8</sup> It also rejects its scholarly characterization as part of a

‘third sector’ beyond the state and the market, or as neutral public ‘educators’ (Arrove, 1982). The evidence presented below demonstrates this. Karl and Katz’s (1981, 1987) approach, echoed by Reich (2018), while historically nuanced, significantly underestimates the degree to which established foundations reinforce capitalist political economy and the manner in which they co-opt and incorporate some dissenting voices, with a view to delimiting radical or transformational change. This also stands as a key weakness of the polycrisis philanthropy approach.

Conversely, a Gramscian approach suggests that the HF is an elite power-oriented crisis machine that is diagnostic, prescriptive and catalytic in building elite consensus for managed change (Parmar, 2012a). This also explains why the HF expressly excluded grassroots mobilizations and resistance movements from its reform strategies, in favour of a top-down, elite-led, technocratic philosophy, rooted, among other influences, in the thinking of James Madison.

### **A Gramscian perspective**

Gramsci’s (1971) concept of organic crisis is now more widely quoted to express the nature of contemporary challenges. For example, in 2019, the Munich Security Conference noted that ‘Antonio Gramsci wrote, “The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born. And in this interregnum, a great variety of morbid symptoms appear”. An apt description of today’ (Grävingsholt, 2019). The HF’s faux Gramscian language, therefore, sits within the current era’s crisis lexicon.

Gramscian theory, however, posits a number of interlinked concepts within a paradigm focused on unequal, class-based power relations in liberal societies. This paradigm describes a system of hegemonic power based largely on the ‘consent of the governed’, but in which power relations are inherently unstable. The maintenance and strengthening of hegemony, and the management and innovative renewal required to address organic crises, involve specific roles for ‘organic intellectuals’, particularly through techniques of ‘passive revolution’. These techniques mobilize, unify and cohere technocratic elites, but actively exclude or marginalize non-elites, and co-opt grassroots voices with a view to their domestication.

To Gramsci (1971, pp. 177–179), an organic crisis is a comprehensive crisis encompassing the totality of a system, when ‘incurable structural contradictions have revealed themselves’. In that system, the ruling elites are no longer able to generate sufficient consensus behind their material, ideological or political strategies. This is a fundamental crisis of hegemony in which established political parties and other elitist forces in civil society and the state no longer enjoy popular support. In such conditions, political systems enter a period of crises of authority, disintegration and civil and political strife (Walter, 2022).

Conversely, Gramsci (1971) argued that despite crises, liberal-democratic systems do not necessarily collapse; they have reservoirs of resilience. Crisis is simultaneously a moment of destruction and reconstruction, when other ways of seeing and organizing the world emerge. History-makers, as Gramsci (1971) called them, work on the terrain of politics, the economy and society as they are, but with a vision of the future, to reconstruct a new, more inclusive hegemony – while still embedding Western and corporate centrality. This challenges Tooze’s (2024) interpretation of Gramscian crisis theory as apparently soothing or reassuring of a progressive future. As Hall (1992) argued, crisis is a moment of renewal for existing elites, not necessarily an inevitable turn to the left. Indeed, given conditions in Anglo-Saxon states, elite-led crisis politics was more likely to shift further to the right (Hall, 1992, pp. 161–174; Payne, 2024).

Gramsci would call the major US foundations ‘state-spirited’ private bodies that see themselves as core to the state’s strengthening and survival, as *building new coalitions* for top-down change, in a moment of crisis-era reconstruction. The HF would be seen, therefore, as a vehicle of ‘passive revolution’: *a crisis machine, embedded in hegemonic power networks, designed to catalyze and mobilize for elite-driven change management and the marginalization or exclusion of mass-driven demands for radical change*. Gramscians would therefore expect an elitist but liberal institution such as the HF to promote renewal and change management that is limited and temporary, and therefore unlikely to resolve systemic shortcomings. Therefore, this paper provides evidence to support Azmanova’s (2020) position on the relative (lack of) elite-based possibilities for post-neoliberal reform and to question arguments implied by Blyth (2013), and Streeck (2017). Blyth and Babb, while sceptical in various ways, appear more hopeful about the emergence of market management strategies associated with post-neoliberalism, while Azmanova and Streeck stress the lack of structural reform built into the ‘new’ paradigm and, therefore, the need for radical change based on precarity-driven cross-class movements.

For Gramsci (1971), agency is essential in shaping historical and political change. The HF is therefore a key agency whose personnel not only developed strategies for change but also occupied important positions in the Biden administration from 2021 onwards. Such positions included membership of the National Security Council (NSC), the National Economic Council (NEC), the Council of Economic Advisers (CEA), and the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), among others. According to Slobodian (2022), this represented a ‘seizure of some of the commanding heights of policymaking by a cohort defining their project self-consciously as transcending liberalism’.<sup>9</sup> The HF also established a global network of 15 universities in the United States and elsewhere (including institutions in Britain, South Africa, Mexico and India, among others). The HF mobilized the Ford Foundation and the Omidyar Network behind Global South university efforts to ‘reimagine economic systems’, build networks ‘challenging neoliberalism’ and advance ‘more equitable growth policies’ (Ford Foundation, 2022). It is to

the elite network-building functions of major foundations, with special reference to the HF, that we now turn. Such elite networks represent a technology of power at the heart of the hegemonic project.

### Foundations as hegemonic elite networks

Social background matters in shaping character, world views and conceptions of the ‘national interest’. Membership of class, ethnic-racial, gender or national groupings shapes identities and designates ‘otherness’. The interconnections of groups of people tell us about their place in class, gender and racial hierarchies, which subtly affect behaviours. Mapping elite networks then also tells us how distinctive groups of people may be, how distant or connected they are to certain elite or other institutions, and how representative they are of the broader population. And when select groups predominate in certain top positions and move in the same circles, it is inevitable they become subject to a certain degree of ‘groupthink’ or consciousness where they equate their own narrow interests with the national interest. Such evidence also negates one key component of liberal-pluralist theory – that the United States is made up of competitive groups in a system resembling the economic model of ‘perfect competition’ in which there is no power elite (Domhoff, 2022). This is important in the current context, given ongoing debates about the merits of liberal-pluralistic polycrisis theory and neo-Marxist Gramscian theory in explaining how power works, and to what ends, in times of crisis – a key concern of this special section of *Economy and Society*.

Integrating elites behind particular hegemonic projects has been foundations’ principal long-term function. Foundations have constructed domestic and international knowledge networks, as ends in themselves and as means to other ends. Networks are a technology of power that typically includes official policymakers and perform two broad but vital functions. Among their *internal functions*, one is to incorporate and socialize scholars through the provision of research funds and career-building structures such as professional societies, conferences and journals. Among their *external functions*, network members produce legitimate knowledge taken seriously by media and policymakers. Knowledge networks regulate the ‘free’ market of ideas, the intellectual environment within which ‘thinkable thought’ occurs, which in turn affects their ability to reproduce itself by assimilating new generations of scholars. Networks bolster US hegemony by promoting specific forms of cooperation and integration for achieving nationalistic and elitist ends (Parmar, 2012a).

The Big Three US foundations – Ford, Carnegie and Rockefeller – behave this way because they are part of the American ‘power elite’, especially significant within the East Coast foreign policy ‘establishment’. Their trustees include Wall Street bankers and lawyers, State Department officials, leaders of both main political parties, members of the national media and ‘Ivy League’ scholars. Demographically, their trustees are overwhelmingly male,

white Anglo-Saxon Protestants (Parmar, 2012a). The HF, a more recent major liberal corporate foundation, fits this characterization, as shown below.

An analysis of all 32 HF trustees for three selected years (2004, 2013 and 2024) was conducted to provide a social, economic and institutional portrait of its major decision-makers over two decades. A key source was the biographical information sections of the HF website, supplemented with information from the websites of affiliations listed therein. The HF claims diversity of ethnicity, gender, politics and ideology. However, no mention is made of trustees' class backgrounds, or their numerous connections with elite organizations or corporations.

The HF is a heavily elite-dominated foundation, led largely by white men and women, with just six non-white individuals on the board over the sample years analysed. Only one Asian American, one Tanzanian and one Singaporean board member was to be found.

The 32 HF trustees analysed attended numerous elite universities (Harvard, 10 connections; Stanford, seven; Yale, four; UC Berkeley, three; USC, Brown and Wellesley, two each; and the remainder at other major universities, including Princeton, Oxford, Imperial and Dartmouth). The sample includes eight PhDs and four MBAs.

Occupationally, law and academia predominate – with 14 university academic connections (including law schools) and nine with law firms. Many trustees derive much of their income from board memberships at numerous nonprofits and philanthropic foundations. The HF trustees served on the boards of 23 other foundations and 16 nonprofits and elite cultural institutions, as well as university boards.

The HF trustees served four in Democratic administrations (Johnson, one; Clinton, one; Obama, three; Biden, one). One trustee served as Obama's energy secretary. However, as noted above, there were several other important appointments from the HF personnel to the Biden administration. Jennifer Harris joined the NSC and NEC and worked closely with Jake Sullivan, Biden's national security adviser, on how 'Bidenomics' conceptualized and delivered a domestic industrial policy for the middle and working class. While simultaneously challenging China's growing economic influence. Other HF personnel in the Biden administration include HF chair Mariano-Florentino Cuéllar (Intelligence Advisory Board) and Jonathan Cooper Pershing (Deputy Envoy at the State Department).

The HF trustees were also active as members and leaders of major foreign policy and national security think tanks including the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (three trustees), the CFR (two trustees), and the Center for American Progress (one trustee). Other such affiliations included the Pacific Council, the Pacific Institute, RAND Corporation, the Energy Policy Institute at the University of Chicago, and the National Committee on US-China Relations. In addition, the HF trustees and programme officers spoke at seminars and conferences at several major think tanks, such as Brookings, while the foundation funded numerous such think tanks amounting to

hundreds of millions of dollars in this century alone. Hence, the HF was embedded in scholarly, policy-oriented think tanks and philanthropic foundation networks that aligned with the main political parties, primarily the Democratic administrations. However, as shown below, the HF funded several influential ‘conservative’ organizations that were close to the Trump administration and to ‘Trumpism’ more generally.

Unsurprisingly, the HF trustees were embedded in the corporate sector: between them, the 32 trustees were directors or chairs of at least 55 corporations, four were business owners, one (Robert F. Erburu) was the CEO of the Times Mirror Company, which owns *The LA Times*, *The Baltimore Sun*, *The Denver Post*, *Newsday* and *National Journal*, as well as television stations. Five trustees were directors of NVIDIA, one of the largest companies in the United States, with a market capitalization of over \$3 trillion and employing almost 30,000 people. NVIDIA is also a major supplier of semiconductors to China, something that has been the object of various restrictive policies of the Biden and Trump administrations (Bluhm, 2022).

### **The HF trustees and political donations**

It is interesting to turn to the political donations of corporations directed by HF trustees. Despite overt critiques of Trump/Trumpism as a threat to US democratic norms, the HF argues that it needs to be ideologically diverse and therefore work with ‘conservatives’. This presents a dilemma, or even a contradiction, for the HF, given the more or less complete ‘Trumpification’ of the GOP (Lind, 2024). While most of the HF-directed firms donated largely to Democratic PACs (political action committees) and candidates, others also donated to the election campaigns of pro-Trump candidates and bodies, including GOP elected officials who refused to certify the results of the 2020 presidential election.

One of the corporations directed by a HF trustee (Alecia Ann DeCoudreaux, vice-president, Eli Lilly & Co.), for example, suspended donations to pro-6 January 2021 election non-certifiers but later resumed donations. The same HF trustee serves on the board of CVS Health, which also reviewed payments to GOP US Senator Josh Hawley (Legum & Zekeria, 2021). CVS is the world’s second-largest healthcare company, ranked 64 in the Forbes Global 2000, with revenues in 2023 of \$357 billion. CVS has donated over \$30,000 to Donald Trump’s campaign (Open Secrets, n.d. b). Additionally, CVS donated at least \$1,079,485 to anti-LGBTQ politicians since 2022. Despite publicity campaigns about its liberal attitude to LGBTQ issues, CVS donated \$127,000 to the campaigns and leadership PACs of 23 intolerant members of Congress, all of whom have received a zero rating from the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), the United States’ largest LGBTQ organization, since November 2022. The company also donated \$550,000 to the Republican Governors Association, \$125,325 to the Republican Attorneys General Association,

\$260,000 to the Republican State Leadership Committee and \$17,250 to state politicians in Louisiana, Ohio and Tennessee who helped enact anti-LGBTQ laws in 2024. Eli Lilly & Co. has donated \$512,500 since 2022 to anti-LGBT causes and organizations at state and federal levels (Legum *et al.*, 2024).

OpenSecrets (opensecrets.org), a website that monitors donations to candidates and election campaigns, also provided reliable information on HF trustee Elizabeth Peters, whose company – Starwood Hotels and Resorts – funded the Republican and Democratic parties. NVIDIA gave \$23,528 to Donald Trump, \$6,000 to Nikki Haley and over \$65,000 to the GOP in the 2024 cycle. It gave the GOP over \$18,000 in 2022, despite the 6 January insurrection, having donated \$36,000 in 2020 (Open Secrets, n.d. a). NVIDIA has moved closer to the second Trump administration and successfully lobbied for the relaxation of US restrictions on China's access to AI technology and semiconductors (*Financial Times*, 2025).

Another trustee, Melody Barnes, via Booz Allen Hamilton, gave tens of thousands of dollars to Trump, Haley and the GOP more broadly in the 2024 election cycle, having made similar donations in 2022. Booz Allen Hamilton also withdrew from sponsoring Washington, DC Pride due to 'recently issued presidential executive orders' (Legum *et al.*, 2025). Barnes, via Ventas, also donated to Nikki Haley. Agilent Technologies also donated to the GOP in 2020, 2022 and 2024 – though in small amounts (HF trustees linked with the company include Walter B. Hewlett and Koh Boon Hwee, among others). Levi Strauss & Co. also supported the GOP.

In addition to the above financial donations, another form of the HF's embeddedness is its own investments in the corporate political economy, which influences its plans and practices in diagnosing and responding to the crisis. Thirty-three per cent of the HF's investment portfolio is in private equity – and private equity firms overwhelmingly backed Trump and the GOP (Hewlett Foundation, n.d. e; *Financial Times*, 2024). Finally, PwC (PricewaterhouseCoopers) – the HF's auditors – donated over \$400,000 to election-denying candidates after 6 January (Crosby & Legum, 2024), and withdrew support for New York City Pride (Legum *et al.*, 2025).

The HF's progressive pro-democracy programmes are further undermined by its strategy of building alliances with sections of the Republican Party – such as funding American Compass, which authored the labour policy sections of the Heritage Foundation's Project 2025 (Nolan, 2023). Even disregarding the role of the Democratic Party, which has been in power over decades and has therefore laid the groundwork for Trumpism, by backing the Trumpist GOP, the HF places great confidence in a party driving the crisis of democracy (Heer, 2023; see also Parmar & Ledwidge, 2020). In this regard, the HF's silence on Trump's election victory in November 2024 and on his plethora of undemocratic, unconstitutional, authoritarian, anti-worker and illegal executive orders and behaviours since taking office in January 2025, is highly instructive. Despite numerous criticisms by the HF of the first Trump administration's policies and statements on climate change, its denials of

supporting an overtly pro-Trump agenda through funding American Compass (Hewlett Foundation, 2023b), among others, and its rejection of Trump's false claims of voter fraud in the 2020 election, the foundation has been silent since November 2025.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, the Council of Nonprofits is challenging the Trump administration's threats to foundations (Dorfman, 2025). Conversely, one of the HF's pro-Trump beneficiaries, American Compass, welcomed Trump's trade tariff offensive, curbs on federal workers' collective bargaining rights, and the effective gutting of the WTO (Cass, 2025). Although the HF is bound by legal restrictions and nonpartisan positioning, its silences on what are its core missions – congressional power, executive overreach, public trust and threats to democracy – suggest a failure to engage with the ground realities of US politics. Such shortcomings are deeply rooted in the HF's primary role in an era of crisis – as a crisis machine.

### **The HF: Liberal crisis machine**

The HF is a liberal-order paradigm institution, arguing that, despite numerous successes, neoliberal market fundamentalism has created many economic problems that have destabilized political systems by generating illiberalism and authoritarianism, thereby endangering democracy. They instead prescribe 'post-neoliberalism', adopting the Mont Pelerin Society's strategy of long-term ideational and policy change – another project funded by bankers and philanthropic foundations. In this view, ideational change works by developing a theory and then embedding it in strategic elite institutions, building a new elite policy consensus (Hewlett Foundation, 2018b).

The HF's liberal 'manifesto' argues that neoliberalism has converged with 'systemic racism' since the 1960s, compounding inequality through demonizing state intervention. The proposed solution to this is a 'more progressive' neoliberalism. The problem, however, is that people across the United States and the globe have largely rejected neoliberalism and embraced varieties of 'populism'; hence the HF proposes a 'new' paradigm that resembles 'a major renovation than a tear down ... to preserve what is good in the old structure, while building something more suited to the needs of current occupants' (Hewlett Foundation, 2020c).

### **The HF's mission – beyond neoliberalism: Forging a paradigm shift**

The HF's ambition to forge a new common sense among elites to displace the centrality of *laissez-faire* reached into the core of 'Bidenomics'. It connected the domestic economy, national security, and democratic 'backsliding' and 'polarization' at home with rising authoritarianism internationally, including China's geoeconomic challenges. It brought numerous trends under a broad intellectual umbrella and a multi-million-dollar funding scheme – trends that have

radically changed the world and therefore reshaped elite strategies to renew US power industrially, politically, governmentally, and as a global force in an increasingly multipolar environment shaped by new economic powers, climate change, supply chains exposed by the pandemic, and over-reliance on China. An HF internal discussion paper noted that ‘geopolitical circumstances have always played a central role in shaping how and why economic paradigms have changed, and the foreign policy and national security communities have played pivotal roles in developing and socializing shifts in our thinking and approach’. Today, the paper continues, China’s state-capitalist model is challenging US power and therefore ‘economic performance ... will determine the outcome of any protracted geopolitical struggle with China’. But China is one of several rising economic powers that must be taken into account in US planning. The United States must take a ‘global perspective’ on political economy (Hewlett Foundation, 2020c, pp. 17–18). This suggests that the HF’s approach is a milder version of the Trump 2.0 trade and tariff strategy, equally aligned or justified in national security terms.

The collaboration between the HF’s Jennifer Harris and Jake Sullivan, Biden’s national security adviser, proved productive. Sullivan’s speech to the Brookings Institution (27 April 2023) summed up the overall rationale and outline of the strategy, which aims to replace untrammelled neoliberal attachment to the market with a greater statist-strategic role that directs development at home and abroad to renew US domestic economic strength, job security and democracy. This envisages a renewed international order that builds alliances, renews multilateral banks, challenges China’s statist Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and ‘de-risks’ supply chains (White House, 2023). Harris’s thinking on the relationship between domestic economic strength, political stability and intensifying competition with China is rooted in her time at the National Intelligence Council and later in Hillary Clinton’s State Department as an architect of its Economic Statecraft programme (2011). Harris’s book (with Robert Blackwill) – *War by other means* (2016) – was a further stepping stone to the HF’s Economy and Society programme, Biden’s NEC and NSC with Sullivan, and then back to the HF in 2023 to resume her role in the Economy and Society programme (Hewlett Foundation, 2023b). Such close state–HF relations blur the line between the state and elites, exposing the outlines of a historic bloc underpinning a hegemonic project.

The HF identified threats to US democracy from polarization and hyper-partisanship in 2013 and anxieties about foreign interference in alignment with US far-right groups. With first-mover advantage, the HF developed and coordinated a foundation network to save democracy. By 2018, it had invested \$150 million ‘to alleviate “the mischiefs of faction”’, as Founding Father James Madison termed it (Hewlett Foundation, 2018d). Trump’s ‘shock’ election in 2016 led directly to a new ‘Digital Disinformation’ programme to counter a mass driver of polarization (Hewlett Foundation, 2018a). The Trump phenomenon was directly linked, according to the HF, to *external actors* who stood to benefit from US domestic strife, as well as to

the ‘rise of tribalism among citizens on the right and left ... posting, and tweeting’ damaging messages (Hewlett Foundation, 2018d, p. 13). Trump was largely seen as a temporary aberration rather than symptomatic of deeper systemic factors. Yet, the sources of mis- and disinformation – social media platforms owned by major corporations and billionaires – were treated as lacking knowledge, agency or incentive to profit by diffusing polarizing content. Similarly, where Trump or Trumpism was seen as having deeper historical or systemic roots, including in the changing character of the Republican Party and related political developments such as the Tea Party, no attempt was made to tackle the problem and its source.<sup>11</sup> Black civil rights had ‘set in motion the polarization that we now reckon with’, including political and electoral realignments and struggles over the size of government. Nevertheless, we ‘are not addressing the root causes of polarization’, but only trying ‘to interrupt the negative cycle’, a prospect about which Kramer was cautiously optimistic (Hewlett Foundation, 2018d, p. 13).

Ironically, the HF’s president reached deep into US history for ‘solutions’ or interruptions to a twenty-first-century problem, the aforementioned Madisonian ‘mischief of faction’. Kramer initiated the HF’s Madison Initiative (later renamed the Democracy Initiative), with Madison reimagined and repurposed to preserve procedural democracy, despite Madison’s authorship of the undemocratic and elitist *Federalist No. 10*. In 2013, the HF believed the predominant issue was *partisan loyalty* and the lack of sufficient deliberative processes in Congress, which drove gridlock and government shutdowns, damaging popular legitimacy (Brest, 2020). Kramer’s approach is rooted in a re-reading of Madison’s works related to smoothing democratic processes to contain ‘mob rule’. That deep scepticism about the capacity of the ‘masses’ meant the only reliable democratic forces were, according to Madison (and quoted in Kramer, 2007), ‘a chosen body of citizens, whose wisdom may best discern the true interests of their country’. Such citizens were the ‘wisest, best educated, and most publicly spirited’, according to Kramer (2007). The result would be ‘a deliberative democracy in which elections are structured to sift out an elite that can then deliberate on our behalf free from irrationality, unreasonableness, and self-interest that make popular politics such a hazard’ (Kramer, 2007, pp. 697–754, 704–705). Madison, according to Kramer, centred ‘the people’ in his view of politics but remained sceptical about their ‘temper’, arguing that ‘popular rule could be dangerous and unjust’ and needed to be kept at arm’s length from actual government. For Madison, popular direct action was for ‘certain great and extraordinary occasions’ only. Hence, ‘Ensuring the will of the majority was reasonable was ... a responsibility of leadership’. For Madison, as quoted by Kramer (2007, pp. 730–731), ‘The class of the literati are the cultivators of the human mind – the manufacturers of useful knowledge – the agents of the commerce of ideas, – the censors of public manners’. Therefore, the HF believes its primary focus is ‘shoring up the system overall, rather than ... on those who have been most marginalised’ (Hewlett Foundation, 2021).

The HF recognized the international character of the problems facing Western polities, and gradually built an extensive network of funders behind the democracy programme – including Ford, Omidyar, Open Society and others, from 2017 onwards. Grantees included think tanks, universities in the United States and internationally, Congress, state and local election bureaucracies, and media organizations (15 institutions in total) (Kettenring, 2023). The HF also backs international student groups campaigning to make the economics discipline better suited to analysing real-world economic issues. There are over 120 ‘Rethinking Economics’ groups across more than 40 countries (Hewlett Foundation, n.d. c).

In addition to working with conservative individuals and organizations, the HF effectively failed to challenge the role of Koch Foundation programmes in boosting the extreme right through various ‘grassroots’ front organizations from 2004. Skocpol’s studies show how that years-long process profoundly affected the rightward shift in the GOP, paving the way to Trump’s election (Skocpol & Hertel-Fernandez, 2016). By so doing, the HF ignored one of the findings of its own survey, which indicated that political scientists considered this the most significant factor in US political polarization. Despite citing Skocpol in their Madison Initiative outline document, the HF accorded ‘big money’ relatively minor status in the overall functioning of US power.<sup>12</sup> On the contrary, the HF cooperated with the Charles Koch Foundation (among others) to fund a programme of research into how social media, specifically Facebook, promotes mis- and disinformation and undermines democratic political culture (Hewlett Foundation, 2018c). In addition, Koch Industries, heavily invested in fossil fuels, opposed and even denied climate change as a pressing concern, although it was central to the HF’s programmes under Kramer’s leadership (Lewis, 2015; see also Mayer, 2015). Consequently, the HF left the more ‘popular’ political terrain to the extreme right while focusing on developing technocratic solutions primarily within establishment liberal organizations and among conservative bodies they deemed part of an emerging consensus around post-neoliberalism.

The HF and Omidyar donated over \$1 million to American Compass, a broadly pro-Trump conservative organization that is mildly critical of the market, which part-authored the labour policy sections of the pro-Trump Project 2025. American Compass’s proposal for a national development bank in the United States, supporting an industrial policy, aligns well with both Trumpism and Bidenism, but is strongly anti-union (AFL-CIO, 2024). The HF views organized labour as unfit for the current era and expressly consults academics and other experts to explore ways to modernize unions, despite arguing that greater past union membership levels had kept income inequality in check. The HF, then, is in line with an emerging new consensus between establishment liberals and conservatives – including Democrats Ro Khanna and Elizabeth Warren, as well as Republicans such as Marco Rubio, JD Vance and Tom Cotton (including other 2020 ‘election deniers’). The new conservatives are described by *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and

*The Economist* as ‘influential’ (American Compass, 2023). Labour experts, however, argue that the emerging pro-corporate bipartisan coalition aims to undermine the union movement (Nolan, 2024). In addition, American Compass backs the efforts to outcompete China and argues that US values are ‘incompatible ... antithetical’ to Chinese authoritarianism (Cass & Rodriguez, 2023).

In a further bipartisan move, the HF published a new ‘Trustworthy Elections Strategy 2021–2025’ even though the 2020 elections were certified as the most secure ever (CISA, 2020). The HF appears to reject Trumpism while funding pro-Trump ‘intellectuals’ in a bid to develop ‘ideological diversity’, thereby strengthening the forces they claimed to have set out to eradicate. Yet, the HF argues that its support for American Compass does not equate to support for the Heritage Foundation-convened Project 2025 as a whole, but only for aspects of its labour policy, nor does the HF financially support Trump. The HF states that it is committed ‘to supporting dialogue across difference’ to strengthen democracy (Hewlett Foundation, 2023b). However, the HF’s ideological diversity is clearly limited and structurally unequal. For example, although the HF supports a critical group of scholars via its History and Political Economy programme, this in no way compares to the political influence of American Compass within the GOP, including senior congressional leaders who promote bills bearing American Compass’s imprint. American Compass’s overlaps with the HF in offering a relatively limited critique of markets, contrast with more significant leftist thinking among the History and Political Economy programme leaders.<sup>13</sup> American Compass and the HF also offer differing but significantly overlapping critiques of China’s emerging economic and geopolitical challenge to US hegemony. In May 2024, the HF provided another \$950,000 to American Compass, amounting to almost 50 per cent of the latter’s budget (Hewlett Foundation, n.d. a). From 2021–2024, the HF donated \$2,661,000 in total to American Compass (Hewlett Foundation, n.d. d). The History and Political Economy programme received a \$111,000 grant in 2021 (Johns Hopkins University, 2021).

Consequently, from a Gramscian perspective, the way the HF uses ‘polycrisis’ in *de facto* terms fails to address the systemic character of the crises of US power; its theory of power fails to deal with the forces driving these dynamics; and its theory of change is effectively built around an elitist, technocratic strategy that tinkers procedurally and behaviourally align with the upper echelons of the political power structures rather than grappling with their structural underpinnings, especially the power of corporations in electoral processes and their influence on the main parties’ agendas. The solutions to the problems of US power, according to this approach, derive largely from the very forces at the root of the crisis, even if their diagnosis reflects elite recognition that the old (neoliberal) order is dying and a new one, post-neoliberalism, is struggling to be born. I argue that a faux Gramscian-inflected theory of change lies at the heart of the HF’s strategy for an intellectual paradigm shift (Hewlett Foundation, 2020d): a foreign policy for the working and middle classes as the

bedrock of a broader strategy to build, with allies and partners, a new multilateral world order to secure supply chains, ‘de-risk’ from, and counter China’s hegemonic threat (Ahmed *et al.*, 2020; see also Cooper, 2023; Harris & Sullivan, 2020). In practice, the HF narrows the range of thinking and action to effect ideological, political and economic change, constrains the development of more radical mass-based alternatives and, through its overt political and ideological critiques, broadens the realm of liberal-philanthropic rhetoric and action while simultaneously neglecting the root causes of the crisis.<sup>14</sup>

The HF’s Economy and Society programme is effectively an elite network for crisis management and liberal self-correction and perpetuation. This programme operates at different levels: to influence the state, galvanize fellow liberal foundations and develop a network of university programmes focused on American political economy in elite universities. But the HF’s internal records show a realistic scepticism about the transformative potential of ideas. In this regard, the Economy and Society initiative’s master document is its December 2020 ‘Grantmaking Strategy’. Here, the HF’s most senior planners set out their goals and methods, fully acknowledging that political outcomes are a complex mix of culture, political actors and unforeseen contingencies. Yet, they argue that our ideas about policy, law and the role of the state are always underpinned by a prevailing intellectual paradigm, which ‘structures the rules of the game and shapes how the various political and lay actors understand their interests, beliefs and material needs – *putting a thumb on the scale in favour of some arguments and against others, while concealing or obscuring options that fall too far outside its central premises*’ (Hewlett Foundation, 2020c, emphasis added). This is precisely the role that a Gramscian analysis assigns to wealthy US corporate foundations.

## Conclusion

The HF played a strategic role in the US foundation world’s embrace of a paradigm shift towards ‘post-neoliberalism’ and defending constitutional processes. Kramer convened an influential meeting of major foundations in 2017 to map out a ‘beyond neoliberalism’ programme. Many from that meeting joined the Biden administration’s economic policy team (Ward, 2022). As the post-neoliberalism programme got underway, the crises of US democracy were supplemented by the need to strengthen the United States to outcompete China. Hence, the programme evolved over time and came to view the US domestic scene in a global context.

The HF’s post-neoliberalism programme effectively linked all aspects of the foundation’s programmes together under a political, informational and political-economy umbrella. In effect, the HF recognized the interlinked character of the US crisis – the pandemic, democratic decline, polarization, conspiracy theories, disinformation via social media, and the role of domestic and external actors in efforts to undermine US democracy and spread chaos.<sup>15</sup>

Ultimately, the HF's bipartisan mission to save US democracy collapsed on 6 January 2021, when a Trump-inspired mob invaded the United States Capitol in an attempt to prevent the certification of the presidential election. Trump's re-election in 2024, despite threats of widespread political violence, should he lose, and amid attacks and threats against election officials and others, is further evidence of the results of the HF's strategy of funding or working closely with pro-Trump conservative organizations. Its silence on the second Trump administration – despite its threat to the HF's stated mission – further underlines its complicity, wittingly or otherwise, in the rise and consolidation of authoritarianism.

Its post-neoliberalism programmes fared better, however, suggesting that the drift of elite opinion across the spectrum was shifting towards enhancing US economic strength in its increasingly intense competition with China which by 2017 was considered a strategic competitor. America First and Bidenomics had important overlaps in promoting the purchase of US goods, applying and intensifying (Trump's) stiff tariffs on China and other competitors, and advancing a growing 'de-coupling' and 'de-risking' trend, with Republican groups such as American Compass arguing for a 'hard break' from China.

Slobodian (2022) argues that the HF's positions in the Biden administration helped puncture the neoliberal myth that global capitalism is somehow apolitical, given the overt politicization of foreign economic policy, especially towards China, and other competitors as well. On the policy front, the HF helped push the OECD policy to tax global corporations at 15 per cent, a position supported in a special issue of the *Boston Review* backed by the HF. Antitrust suits against major monopolies such as Facebook, led by Lina Khan at the FTC, were further indications of a challenge to 'cosmopolitan capital' from Democrats and right-wing Republicans, as was the emerging consensus around domestic industrial policies and infrastructure spending.

Yet the HF ultimately failed to deal with systemic crises: its programmes did not connect governmental and partisan crises to systemic social and economic inequality, especially in light of the 2008 financial crash, or to the growing power of big money in US politics following Supreme Court decisions. Similarly, its digital disinformation initiative treated the Trump phenomenon as entirely unprecedented, even though there was already a developed 'post-truth' politics in the Obama and Romney contest in 2012. The effects of the 2008 crash and the Great Recession, as well as the Obama-era corporate bail-outs, were devastating for working people and highly visible but not given serious attention by elites. That is, the inherent conservatism of a liberal foundation was evident in its failure to see what was already clear to critical observers (Parmar, 2012b).<sup>16</sup>

Ultimately, establishment liberals prove unreliable against the far right, largely because they are embedded in corporate political economy and networks. They operate far removed from the lives of poor and disadvantaged working-class minorities. As one critic noted, the HF's programmes have 'little to do with ... the anger and hopelessness in the inner cities, the vast

differences in power among various groups and the need to break eggs if omelettes are to be made' (Nielsen, 2001, p. 214). Liberals cede mass politics to the far right amid discontent caused by neoliberalism (Brown, 2019; Robin, 2018).

The HF's concept of democracy is institutional: congressional procedures and establishment parties. Its selected allies are elite foundations and institutions. It backed right-wing pro-Trump groups and candidates, including those who contributed to the Heritage Foundation's authoritarian Project 2025. Indeed, Daniel Stid, former head of the HF's democracy programme, while lamenting the re-election of Trump in November 2024, urges the continuation of the very strategy that created the conditions for Trump's success (Stid, 2024).

It is clear by now that, although there are significant similarities in what 'poly' and 'organic' crises look like, and in how they overlap, intersect and compound one another, there are serious consequential divergences. First, who is the prime mover in driving change, and what is the character of the changes required? Second, who benefits from the HF's strategies and who loses? On each question, the HF's strategy is clearly elitist and takes a dim view of popular mobilizations for change. In effect, it has delivered only a minor variation of the *status quo* and, with regard to democracy, arguably played a role in Trump's re-election. Hence, organic crisis theory better explains the HF's strategies and programmes, their likely limitations and failures, as well as their hegemonic character *vis-à-vis* the goals of the American power elite at home and its global roles. Thus, this is a hegemonic project at the heart of US elite and imperial power strategies to manage US power in an era of crisis. The prognosis is therefore bleak in terms of any serious or radical change at home barring the side effects of change primarily aimed at gearing up the US domestic economy for global competition and potential conflict, especially with China. The HF's liberalism forecloses radical solutions to organic crises, making the foundation a crisis machine, like liberalism itself. But given the depth and range of the crises of US power today, is liberal 'self-correction' enough to reverse, even temporarily, factionalization at home and rising geopolitical tensions and potential military conflict between great powers? (Walter, 2022).

Ultimately, the HF's liberalism reveals itself as fundamentally technocratic and elitist: creative in its defence of existing patterns of power, modestly reformist, yet wedded to the privileges of private property and wealth and ambivalent about the radical potential of mass mobilizations. It must, almost out of necessity, collaborate with other elitist forces, as its theory of power and change privileges elites, endows them with reason and moderation, and both frowns on and fears the irrational mass. This stands in direct contrast to Gramscian philosophy and mission: bringing the most marginalized and excluded to the centre of social and political life. To the HF, the masses are significant only as agents of chaos, as actors made valuable when mobilized or contained within elite networks, while Gramsci rejected philanthropy as

incorporation and co-optation: ‘The only alternative is to tear down the merry-go-round itself and replace it with the architecture of a new politics’ (Germino, 1990, pp. 12–13, 53). The HF and, by extension, polycrisis proponents, favour ‘a major renovation than a tear down’ (Hewlett Foundation, 2020c).

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

### **Ethical approval statement**

No ethical approval was required as the paper did not require work with human subjects.

### **Generative AI statement**

I confirm that Generative AI tools have not been used in the preparation and writing of this paper.

### **Notes**

1 The HF was founded in 1966 as a local Palo Alto-based family foundation that has, since the early 2000s, professionalized to become the fifth-largest American foundation, with an endowment of over \$13 billion and annual grant-making in the hundreds of millions of dollars. Retrieved from <https://hewlett.org/our-grants/>

2 The emphasis is on state-led industrial policy rewarding corporations to build ‘green’ electric cars in the United States and subsidizing consumers to purchase them.

3 For discussions of the inspiration behind ‘Bidenomics’, see this HF series (n.d. f), *New Common Sense* newsletter.

4 In supporting election deniers, such conservatives were joined by donations from Koch Industries and its PACs (Stone, 2022).

5 Reich (2018) discusses some aspects of the HF’s activities from a liberal-reformist perspective, while the present analysis is rooted in a critical approach that locates the HF, and its ‘inadequacies’, in its structural role in a capitalist democracy and political economy.

6 The HF website, as well as Bloomberg, Wikipedia, personal bios on LinkedIn, and general ‘web scraping’ of interviews and articles in the press.

7 Adam Tooze of Yale popularized the term, which has become the key paradigm for Bretton Woods institutions.

8 A 501 (c) (3) organization is a tax-exempt nonprofit organization, pays no federal income tax and is either a charitable organization, religious organization, and/or private foundation, that is non-political. Hewlett Foundation is categorized as such the Internal Revenue Service of the United States. Retrieved from <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/1/501c3-organizations.asp>.

9 The HF appointees were Heather Boushey (CEA), K. Sabel Rahman (Senior Counsellor, Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs), Felicia Wong (US representative, G7 Economic Resilience Panel), Jennifer Harris (NSC, NEC) and Lina Khan (Director, FTC).

10 See <https://hewlett.org/search/?keyword=donald+trump>

11 Kramer (2018) argues in this ‘annual letter’ that, although parties have played their role, the *Republican Party has been the main culprit, promoting partisanship*, violating democratic political conventions, supporting ‘absurdities like birther-ism, and dubious congressional investigations. The GOP leadership overrode every shred of normal legislative process and respect for democratic norms’.

12 The HF abandoned its efforts regarding big money in politics in November 2020, despite ‘perverse incentives for politicians of all parties to cater to a small group of highly polarized, ideological individuals’. This decision came despite ‘almost everyone’ who participated in the HF’s own surveys of its priorities arguing that continued work in that area was vital. See ‘Appendix: Looking back at learning from our prior work’ (Hewlett Foundation, 2021, p. 13).

13 The HPE Project’s website (hpeproject.org) acknowledges the HF’s generous support.

14 As Henry David Thoreau argued, ‘And it may be that he who bestows the largest amount of time and money on the needy is doing the most by his mode of life to produce that misery which he strives in vain to relieve’ (Parmar, 2012a, p. 1).

15 The Hewlett Foundation (n.d. b). The Alliance for Securing Democracy, an initiative associated with the German Marshall Fund of the United States, aims to deter, defend against, and disincentivise authoritarian attempts to undermine or interfere with democratic institutions.

16 For an outline of the HF’s top-down conservatism, see Nielsen (2001) especially pp. 212–214.

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